**The Life of Lucille Ball: the Good, the Bad, and the Unfortunate**

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**Abstract:** The character and many personalities of Lucille Ball are, without a doubt, very complex.As a result, it is important for her fans and others interested in her to realize that this star was shaped around both the successful events in her life and career, as well as the misfortunate events. This article will critically analyze the hardships in Lucille Ball’s early childhood, teenage years, and adulthood and will explain how each of these hardships made her the star that her fans came to know and love.

**Keywords:** hardships, personality, perseverance, struggles, success

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ucille Ball is perhaps one of the most beloved personalities of the

twentieth century. She had and still has many beloved fans and respected admirers. Recent research on the life of Lucille Ball has focused on all of the areas in which she was a pioneer in the American television industry and a genius in comedy. These studies have portrayed her life with the assumption that her path was always an easy and successful one. Although this assumption has generated important research, the emphasis has always been on her innovative style and the many novel improvements that she has contributed to American television. Few studies have considered the impact of the many obstacles and misfortunes that she faced in her life and how they helped to shape her personality, an issue that I will explore in this article.

**Background**

Researchers have suggested that Lucille Ball was a pioneer in American comedy entertainment and enjoyed success on many levels. Her number one rated television show in the 1950s, *I Love Lucy*, revolutionized American television and paved the way for future comedy sitcoms. She won five Emmy Awards, she was the first woman on the cover of *TV Guide*, she was the first woman to run a major production company, Desilu Productions, and she won many prestigious awards including the International Radio and Television Society’s Gold Medal, the Kennedy Center Honor Award, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom Award. Above all, however, Lucille Ball remains known as the “Queen of Comedy.” Although it has been sixty years since the filming of the original *I Love Lucy* television shows and more than twenty years after her death, Lucille Ball still inspires many. Countless numbers of people, especially fans, continue to enjoy the re-runs of *I Love Lucy* on television and even visit her birthplace in Jamestown, New York. Lori Landay’s journal article, "Millions `Love Lucy': Commodification And The Lucy Phenomenon", written in 1999, explains, “Today, Nick at Nite reruns, websites, fan conventions, collectibles, television specials, books, videotapes, laserdiscs, the merchandising, and the recent popular vote to put Lucy on a U.S. postage stamp commemorating the 1950s are all evidence of the contemporary Lucy phenomenon” (Landay, page 26). Without a doubt, Lucille Ball was an extremely successful woman who left behind an outstanding legacy.

While most research has portrayed a picture of Lucille Ball as always being confident, successful, and in control, opportunities remain to critically analyze the many unfortunate occurrences in her childhood and adulthood. It is only by closely examining the many obstacles and misfortunes of her life that a true, complete picture of her character can be shaped. The study of these dimensions of her life accent her tremendous perseverance and make her successes all the more notable. Throughout each season of Lucy’s life, hardships are recorded. In her young life, these include the death of her father before age four, being abandoned by her mother and step father when they left town to find work elsewhere, growing up with an alcoholic stepfather who disliked children, surviving poor conditions, and being sent home from drama school in New York City at the age of fifteen. Each of these occasions instilled a sense of abandonment in Lucille Ball’s life. While trying to establish a career in New York City at the age of seventeen, she developed a serious case of rheumatoid arthritis and was sent home again to recuperate for a period of almost three years to learn how to walk again. As Lucy moved into adulthood, life also was not easy. Establishing a life in Hollywood was difficult work, and many times, she was cast in “B-rated” movies. In addition, although the love of her life was Desi Arnaz, it was a difficult marriage, eventually ending in divorce in 1960. Undoubtedly, these misfortunes in her life influenced her character. They greatly contributed to her determination to succeed. Growing up in a poor, unstable household impacted Lucille Ball in a way that made her long to turn her life around and make a name for herself. Her need for attention was also established at an early age through the constant abandonment by her parents and the rejection of her drama school. Comedy also played an intricate role in the life of Lucille Ball because it seemed to mask the seriousness about her life. Through this, she developed her sense of humor and her love of making others laugh. In addition, Lucille Ball developed a need for her partner Desi Arnaz. He was one of the first people to make her feel loved, which introduced a new aspect in her life. To understand the whole personality of Lucille Ball, these life-shaping aspects of her life need to be given considerable recognition.

**Theoretical Framework**

Every human life is a tapestry made up of colorful threads representing success, happiness, and good fortune but also dark threads representing hardships, setbacks, and difficulties. In order to accurately understand the complete picture of an individual, all of these facets of their life must be viewed since each event has played a part in shaping the personality and character of the person.

Like others before me, I will continue to address Lucille Ball’s success in her career; however, I will also examine her downfalls and how these hardships contributed to the overall personality of Lucille Ball that we came to know and love. A theoretical framework will be presented in this paper to consider the impact that misfortunes have in shaping an individual’s philosophy on life. An appropriate approach to this includes an examination of both major and minor events in the individual’s life, an evaluation of the individual’s personal thoughts and experiences, and a speculation as to how those events may have influenced the person. To do this, I will first critically analyze each of the events in the life of Lucile Ball and make a special note of any occurrence that people would consider unfortunate. Then, I will incorporate direct quotes of Lucille Ball pertaining to any and all of these unfortunate events in order to get a better picture of how she perceived them and the emotions that they stirred in her. Finally, I will interpret what I have learned about her life to speculate how these events shaped her development and character.

**Case Analysis: Challenges in the Life of Lucille Ball**

In prior research on the life of Lucille Ball, the general public is given a picture of her life in which most events went very smoothly and that she progressed through life always enjoying the sweet smell of success. On closer inspection of her life, the researcher sees that this simply is not true. The problem is that there is a discrepancy between what people perceive as the life of Lucille Ball and the reality of what it was really like. In order to address this problem, I will present a critical analysis of the unfortunate events of her life, which others have not yet considered. Applying this approach is appropriate because her life was riddled with challenges that were undoubtedly major, life changing events that certainly shaped her personality and determination to succeed. This allows for a thorough understanding of who exactly hid behind the famous television personality, Lucille Ball. To do this, the hard ships in her early childhood, in her young adulthood, and in her adulthood will be further explored.

*Early Childhood: Early Death of her Father and an Uninvolved Stepfather*

Lucille Ball endured the early loss of her father, Henry Ball, when she was about three and a half years old. Despite her young age, this left a lasting impression in her mind as she remembers her mother crying. She also remembers a bird flying through the window, and this led to a lifelong fear of birds. A biography written on Lucille Ball mentions, “Ball recalls little from the day her father died, only fleeting memories. A picture fell, and a bird got trapped in the house. Ever since that day she had an intense bird phobia” (Lucille Ball). To make matters worse for Lucy, her mother, Dee Dee, was forced to find work, which meant less time spent with her. Through her employment, Dee Dee met and married Edward Peterson. This event was also unfortunate for Lucy in that Mr. Peterson disliked small children and became an uninvolved stepfather. When he and his new wife left town to find employment, Lucy was left in the care of her stepfather’s parents. Lucy notably hated this period of her life marked by isolation and feelings of abandonment. Her family believed, “nothing in this life was to be enjoyed, only endured. It was at this time Lucy learned to live in her imagination, and to step inside other people's skins, indispensable abilities for an actress” (Lucy’s Childhood). Undoubtedly, these situations forced Lucille Ball to face separation and were a stimulus for her to develop a desire for independence.

The fear of abandonment that Lucy was exposed to early in her life played an important role in influencing her dependency on Desi Arnaz in their marriage. Although she loved Desi very much, it was a very difficult marriage. Their work apart from each other and Desi’s problem with drinking and womanizing greatly contributed to its failure. Despite Lucy’s filing for divorce in 1944, only four years after they were married, she endured the marriage until 1960. She expresses the impact that this divorce had on her in stating, “I hate failure and that divorce was a Number One failure in my eyes. It was the worst period of my life. Neither Desi nor I have been the same since, physically or mentally” (BrainyQuote). Here, Lucy states her feelings with the outcome of her divorce. She was determined to try to make the marriage work because she did not like failure. One can speculate that the early loss of her father, the isolation she felt from her stepfather, and her divorce from Desi played an important role in driving her to persevere. Perhaps, Lucy was afraid of the same type of separation and abandonment she endured as a young child and then later on in her marriage.

*Adolescence and Young Adult: Repeated Failures in School and Show Business*

The professional life of Lucille Ball was marked by repeated setbacks and failures. As a teenager, she was enrolled in a premiere drama school in New York City. Her lofty dreams were crushed when only six weeks later she was sent home by school officials, who were convinced that she was too shy and lacked sufficient talent. Lucy persevered. She returned to New York City in her early twenties, but just when her career was looking promising, she developed a debilitating case of rheumatoid arthritis and was forced to return home. In her extended recuperation, she even had to learn how to walk again. Still, Lucy would continue to try. Upon returning to New York, she had numerous jobs, including working as a cigarette girl and as a fashion model and also an unsteady job on Broadway for only a brief period of time. Still, the dream of being an actress survived. Lucy relocated to Hollywood after she became a dancer as a Goldwyn Girl. This would begin a lengthy period in her life in which she was cast in ‘B level’ movies. Even though she gained the title “Queen of the Bs”, she persevered. Lucille Ball lived by her famous saying, “One of the things I learned the hard way was that it doesn't pay to get discouraged. Keeping busy and making optimism a way of life can restore your faith in yourself” (BrainyQuote). Undoubtedly, the many professional setbacks that Lucille Ball endured strengthened her resolve and determination to succeed. It necessarily instilled in her an uncompromising work ethic and a perfectionist attitude. It’s quite possible that if Lucille Ball would have become a great “A” movie star, she would have never gotten involved in the radio or television, and as a result, television would not have reaped the benefits of the new ideas of Lucy and Desilu. It is a great possibility that Lucy would not have developed into the television sensation that she became in the 1950s had her professional career as a young adult been smoother.

*Adulthood: Miscarriages and Pregnancy*

Despite a challenging marriage, Lucile Ball desperately wanted children. This also was not an easy chapter in her life. She suffered multiple miscarriages before having her first born when she was just a month shy of her fortieth birthday. A year and a half later Lucy was due to have her second child. The dilemma was that the number-one rated television show at this time was *I Love Lucy*, but pregnant women were never before viewed on national television. Instead of shying away from this predicament, Lucy rose to the occasion. The producers of the show wrote her pregnancy into the script. Furthermore, Lucy scheduled her Caesarian section for the same day that her television character, Lucy Ricardo, gave birth. A webpage dedicated to Lucille Ball explains, “When Ball found out she was pregnant, she insisted that her condition be written into the script; it was the first time a pregnant woman had been depicted on TV. Little Ricky’s birth on January 19, 1953 drew an estimated 44 million viewers, breaking all records” (*Women Who Changed America).* Through this example, Lucy became a nationally recognized model of a ‘working mother’, and she rose to become one of the most successful businesswomen in Hollywood. Perhaps the many trials and challenges of her life taught Lucille Ball the invaluable lesson of perseverance and hard work, without which she would not have achieved the degree of talent and fame for which she is noted.

**Conclusion**

All in all, the personality of Lucille Ball was molded by both the good times and the bad times in her life. Her determination shines through as a major character trait. In multiple cases in her life, she either failed at something or she faced hardships. She overcame these difficulties, not by giving up, but by continuing to put forth an uncompromising determination to succeed. A second major personality trait that was shaped by her misfortunes was the sense of humor by which she was known. Lucy always felt the need for comedy and laughs. It makes sense that the struggles that she faced were a main contribution to her need of enlightenment and laughter. Comedy and striving to make others laugh helped to mask all of the seriousness that was involved in her life. Known as one of the most inspiring female comedians and actresses of all time, Lucille Ball exemplifies perseverance in each aspect of her character.

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